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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT1090, MGLE01: AMAL-HIZBALLAH MARRIAGE WEAKENING AMAL

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT1090	2006-04-07 11:41	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

Appears in these articles:

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001090

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/06/2016
TAGS: [IR](#) [IS](#) [KISL](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: AMAL-HIZBALLAH MARRIAGE WEAKENING AMAL

BUT MAY OPEN A WAY FOR OTHER SHIA

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Section 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Econoff met separately with independent Shia leaders Mohammad Obeid and Mohammad Baydun on April 5. Both Obeid and Baydun reported that Amal's support is crumbling away at the rank-and-file level. The main reason was Amal movement leader and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri's perceived subservience to Hizballah as well as his rampant corruption. Berri is even losing supporters in his power base in Tyre and among government employees. Obeid saw an opportunity in the erosion of Amal support. His embryonic third way movement is quietly recruiting disgruntled Amal supporters by promising to return to the Imam Musa Sadr's vision. Baydun, however, doubted that the political climate is right for a Shia third way movement. Obeid said that the political climate is gradually changing because the aura around Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Hizballah is fading as

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he engages more and more in ordinary politics. Both Obeid and Baydun saw the prospects for Hizballah disarmament as dim. End summary.

THE AMAL GIANT HAS FEET OF CLAY

12. (C) On April 5, econoff met separately with two prominent independent Shia leaders: intellectual and political analyst Mohammad Obeid and former MP and cabinet minister Mohammad Baydun. Both Obeid and Baydun, from Nabatiyeh and Tyre respectively, reported that support for Amal in southern Lebanon is crumbling away. According to Obeid, the main reason is the loss of credibility by Amal movement leader Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. There is the perception that Berri is a junior partner to Hizballah and does whatever Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah asks of him. Second, Berri's reputation for rampant corruption is catching up to him. Obeid said that Amal supporters in the thousands are leaving Amal to support Hizballah. He noted the large number of Amal supporters at Hizballah's February 23 rally to protest the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, Iraq. Obeid said that such a large Amal turnout for a Hizballah rally would have been unheard of a few years ago.

13. (C) There are additional signs that Berri is losing ground in his power base. Even some of the 5,000 government workers who owe they jobs to Berri's patronage are leaving his fold. Obeid added that if privatization proceeds, Berri will be in big trouble once his cronies lose their patronage jobs. On February 23, Berri also held a rally in Tyre against the Golden Mosque bombing but only 35 people showed up to hear him speak. Tyre is supposed to be Berri's stronghold, emphasized Obeid. He estimated that with a new electoral law, and if Hizballah does not save Berri with a joint list, Berri's parliamentary bloc would shrink from 15 MPs to five or six in the next elections. Obeid does not expect Hizballah or Syria to rescue Berri in the next elections. The Syrian regime is angry at Berri, according to Obeid. Damascus blames Berri, as leader of the Ayn el-Tinneh coalition, for failing to defeat the "Cedar Revolution." There also is talk that Berri allowed pro-Syrians in parliament and government to lose their jobs.

14. (C) In a separate meeting on April 5, Baydun had similar views. Berri is seen as being with Hizballah. Some two to three thousand young people have left Amal for Hizballah, according to Baydun. Amal is increasingly viewed in the Shia community as a Berri family enterprise. Berri has placed his brothers and relatives in high positions in government, thus allowing them to skim off public funds, according to Baydun. Baydun does not think Berri can win another term as Speaker.

15. (C) Obeid had recently returned from meetings in Nabatiyeh and was buoyed by the prospects of forming a third way Shia political movement. Shia intellectuals have never been with Hizballah and are the biggest supporters of a third way. However, Obeid said he and his allies were beginning to recruit Amal supporters. His group, still in the formative stages, will structure its platform around the Imam Musa Sadr, just like Amal. However, the message will be that Obeid's group is staying true to Musa Sadr's vision by

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refusing to engage in corruption.

16. (C) Obeid was optimistic that he could recruit large numbers of Amal supporters by focusing on Berri's well-known corruption. Obeid asserted that the Berri family is worth around USD 2 billion. "Imagine," he exclaimed, "I knew Berri in 1990 and he was living in a rented apartment!" In addition, the Berri family are most likely the largest land owners in southern Lebanon. Obeid added that Berri receives USD 400,000 a month from Iran. He uses a fourth of the money to shore up his support and pockets the rest, according to Obeid. (The political problem is not that he receives money from Iran, but that he keeps most of it.) Obeid plans to appeal to the secular, nationalist nature of traditional Amal supporters. Econoff asked whether Obeid's plan would basically gut Amal for his third way movement. Obeid acknowledged that Hizballah supporters would not necessarily flock to him.

17. (C) Baydun also reported that many Amal supporters are unhappy with Berri and are looking for another movement. However, Baydun, who contemplated running against Amal-Hizballah in last year's parliamentary elections, said that those who would be open to a third way, namely Shia elites, intellectuals, and disgruntled Amal supporters, lack a credible face to rally behind. They need prominent Shia on their side. Also, the political climate right now is not right. It would be difficult for a third way movement to campaign without being seen as anti-Hizballah and anti-resistance.

BREAKING HIZBALLAH TABOOS

18. (C) Econoff asked Obeid if he wouldn't just face the same vicious Hizballah political attacks that previous third way movement proponents have faced. Obeid admitted that this was an obstacle, but clarified that his movement is looking at the long term. He can sense the political climate changing as taboos about discussing Hizballah and its resistance activities are beginning to fade away. First, any Shia seen shaking the hand of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja' three months ago would have been declared a traitor. Now, Nasrallah is sitting at the same table with Ja'ja' in the national dialogue. By participating in the national dialogue and sitting down with the likes of Walid Jumblatt, Amin Gemayel, and Berri, Nasrallah has lowered himself to the level of Lebanon's ordinary politicians. Obeid can see the aura around Nasrallah fading as he participates more in basic politics. Second, Hizballah has opened itself to negotiations on its arms and activities. Before it was taboo to question the legitimacy of the resistance, and now Hizballah has submitted to at least talks on its arms even if it gives unrealistic conditions for disarmament. Third, the prospect of U.S.-Iranian diplomatic talks would show that even Iran will talk to the USG. Hizballah cannot afford to be more extreme than Iran.

19. (C) Obeid admitted that he has a long way to go. The current climate of confessional tensions is unfavorable to a third way. Hizballah has been telling the Shia that only

Hizballah can protect them from the Sunni, Christians, and Druze. The Shia community is fearful of being left out of governing the country if it does not coalesce around a strong party. The Shia are afraid of losing the political and economic ground they have gained since the 1970s. According to Obeid, Shia resentment of other confessions is strong because the others accuse Shia of being Syria supporters.

NOT SO OPTIMISTIC ON DISARMAMENT

¶10. (C) Obeid was not as optimistic on the prospects for Hizballah disarmament as he was on political change in the Shia community. Obeid did not think Hizballah would ever deliver its arms to the Lebanese army or join it. Hizballah does not trust the military and security services now that Syrian intelligence is at least overtly gone. The most the national dialogue may accomplish, according to Obeid, would be an agreement that Hizballah could not use its arms whenever it wanted to. Hizballah would have to consult with the GOL before carrying out any military operations.

¶11. (C) Baydun was equally pessimistic about the chances that Hizballah would disarm. He thinks the process would take years. Hizballah will argue that the Lebanese army is not ready to take over Hizballah positions on the border that

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many southern Shia see as a cordon sanitaire protecting them from future Israeli aggression. Hizballah enjoys the credit for nearly six years of stability in southern Lebanon, according to Baydun. Baydun doubts Shia could support disarmament because they distrust the Maronites and Saad Hariri. Shia fear that the Maronites and Hariri will try to dismantle the state into a confederation. (Comment: This Shia fear is ironic given that Hizballah operates as a virtual state-within-a-state in south Beirut, southern Lebanon, and parts of the Biqa' Valley. End comment.) Baydun dismissed the Aoun-Hizballah agreement as a tactical move by Hizballah. Hizballah feels no obligation to honor it in the long term.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Obeid was characteristically overly optimistic. His movement, if it gets off the ground, will face the same blistering political counter-attack from Hizballah that other third way attempts faced last year. Even the Mufti of Sidon had to retreat under the Hizballah storm. Nonetheless, Obeid's reports, if true, are encouraging for the prospects of choice among Shia. It should be noted that for the near to medium term, a successful third way movement is more likely to strip away Amal than cause any significant damage to Hizballah's support. End comment.

FELTMAN